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How 'supervisory rounding' builds a better workplace

During my time managing supervisors, one situation that was deeply troubling to me was when I perceived one of my supervisors was out of touch with their area. I reasoned that, since I had responsibility for a much broader area, I shouldn't know more about what was going on in their specific area than they did.

The first thing I checked was to ensure I hadn't become part of the problem by overburdening the supervisor with administrative work. Organizations often lose sight of the fact that supervision is first and foremost a people job, not a paper computer job. Occasionally, this resulted in discontinuing or delegating various reporting, freeing the supervisor to focus on their primary task.

My expectation for supervisors was that they visit each of their employees at the employee's work station three times daily. Understanding that supervisors are among the busiest people at work, I coached them to develop visual signals as they toured their areas so they could instantly ascertain wheth-



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er activities were in control or not. For example, if a machine was a bottleneck, was the next scheduled job identified and fully ready? Skillfully applied, visual cues allow busy supervisors to know where their valuable time

is best spent.

A terrific analogy for these frequent checks are the rounds nurses perform on their patients. Many health care facilities now document standard work for nurses, defining rounding frequency and the actual steps to be taken when visiting a patient.

Likewise, many top organizations create standard work for supervisor rounding. This ensures that all supervisors are trained on, clearly understand, and are held accountable to the currently known best practices.

While standard work should always be created with representation of those doing the work, in this case super-

visors, here's a list of best practices which should be considered:

- Designate the number of visits to each employee each day.
- Vary the actual route and timing of rounds, as this provides a different perspective and fuller picture of the workplace.
- Connect with each employee on a personal level daily. This isn't a conversation about the weather, but rather a topic that is unique to each employee regarding family, hobbies and other personal interests.
- Most importantly, discuss the daily work. Ensure the employee understands why their activity is important and how it supports the big picture. Are things going as planned today? If not, why? What works well and what needs improvement? Is the employee capable of making the improvement or are additional resources required? What's the status of prior topics discussed?

This is the supervisor's chance to hand out praise, learn about barriers that require their support, and coach performance issues while they're still molehills: "Bill, your area didn't meet our

end-of-shift cleanliness standard yesterday. That's unusual for you. What's up?"

- Document pertinent discussions, good and bad, using a rounding log or employee filing system. This ensures that topics will be appropriately revisited in the future and also provides useful data for performance appraisals.

In his book "Three Signs of a Miserable Job," author Patrick Lencioni identifies anonymity, irrelevance and lack of measurement as three issues which are fatal to an engaged workforce. Skillful supervisory rounding attacks all three. It lays the groundwork for a strong relationship with each employee that will withstand the inevitable challenges of work in today's competitive climate.

That's immeasurably more valuable than any report.

Rick Brimeyer is the president of Brimeyer LLC, an independent management consulting firm in Ames that guides organizations to higher performance by focusing on process improvement and leadership development.

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